

# Theorizing the Components of Visual Arts as a Tool in Creating Knowledge in Contemporary Academic Discourse

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## Abstract

What constructs and gives understanding to new knowledge, its evaluation and meaning seems to dominate discourse these days in the university space, especially since the introduction of the visual arts field as a research degree in the university. What is new knowledge in the context of visual arts in an intellectual community like the university? Does art create knowledge in any given platform? What would be the methodology in this field? Can the body of the visual arts manifest a clear process of critical thinking, debate, and create a clear methodological process of creating new knowledge? Jelili Atiku and Odun Orimolade employ performance and drawing as clear processes of expression and contextualizing of knowledge in the visual arts. In the same vein, the authors have interrogated the creative imagination of Emmanuel Irokanulo in his doctoral dissertation on renewal of shadow as a component of new thinking in contemporary painting as a source of qualitative understanding of knowledge. The wall hangings of Blaise Gundu Gbaden, also engaged as a doctoral thesis, have been critically examined as a knowledge generating aspect of visual arts research.

**Keywords:** Visual Arts, Research Degree, Drawing, Performance Act, Painting, Wall Hanging.

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## 1. Introduction

What is knowledge in the broadest sense of the word and its specific essence in constructing contemporary discourse in the visual arts? This understanding is necessary to clearly define the status of visual arts in the intellectual community like the university in Nigeria and other developing countries in the world. The context of knowledge in the visual arts is quite different in reasoning if compared to the scientific mode of knowledge production in the sciences. The visual arts deal more with human feeling and craft rather than scientific theory that defines knowledge or understanding in the quantitative view.

These understandings or knowledge clearly characterized in the theory of modernism and post modernism which some scholars understand as “the sea change”, meaning the discourse between the ocean and her current, cannot create a steady image in one’s mind rather, it seems to create a continual dialogue between the two which create unsteady conversation in an unending manner or undefined situation which can manifest and be interpreted either way; the analogy of sea change is that “human understanding” and ideas continue to change in creating a constant understanding of the phenomenal “the world”. However, modern thinkers have continuously thought through the idea that the scientific mode of intelligence cannot assess the development of human sensation and feeling where the visual arts seems to rely on, but sees the human representation or self-determination as being central to human knowing and knowledge.

Langer (1979) persuades us to think and believe that the visual arts is a symbol of representation of human feeling and understanding which in turn constructs knowledge within human spaces. The idea of knowledge and the visual arts continue to challenge both the artists in the academy and other related scholars to continue to debate and reason through this context. Art must seem different from the science or social science mode; artists and scholars must continue to push the boundaries of learning to rediscover art as a source of knowing in the university space; as according to Robert, E. Innis (2009),

*Post-Kantian opposition to materialism, was based on the claim that there is no way in which what is merely objective and mechanical can give rise to what is subjective and self-determining, which, following Kant, is the essential focus of a philosophy no longer reliant upon theological dogmatism. This led “Fichte” to an absolutisation of the I. The advantage of this absolutisation was that it seemed to obviate the problem of the thing in itself, which is now located within the I. “Fichte” (in Bowie, 2003:P 97),*

Art knowledge cannot be accessed through the domain of scientific theories rather through the self-conscious, thought representation and the metaphysical counterpart which is the “the lived experience” and self-determining context, but one question that would be begging for an answer is, “how is knowledge produced during the creation of art objects and what is the thinking of the artist during this artistic engagement”? Schelling in Bowies (2003: 111),

*He insists that philosophy’s reliance on “intellectual intuition” in the sense of thinking about thinking is itself an active process, but it is directed inwards, not towards an object, whereas the production in*

*art is directed inwards, not to reflect the unconscious through products. Art therefore becomes the document and organ of philosophy, turning what otherwise must remain inaccessible to us into intuitable object.*

Looking for a reason why art can be considered as one of the knowledge production platforms is perhaps to understand the meaning and definition of Knowledge in itself. According to Elliot (2008 P3) understanding depends really on the technique one has undertaken and the complexity of the problem one pursues. Even the word knowledge may be regarded as a difficult word to define in terms of the visual arts and perhaps the voluptuous bodies against decomposed elements of modern paintings and other forms of the visual arts, which the entire modernism has created difficulty for us in articulating its meaning and purpose to modernity and human development. Knowledge is a term of a noun, knowing is a verb. And knowing may be a much more appropriate description of the processes of inquiry made in pursuit of a problem that will not yield to a set of rigid answers. Inquiry always yields tentative conclusions rather than permanently nailing down the facts. The question, what knowledge is in terms of visual arts, and what it is in the general term is the focus of this article. The second idea is to understand what constitutes knowledge in a “university space”. University is a place where knowledge is sought for, reconstructed and given a new meaning and understanding using certain data to determine the logic behind the new idea. Can the elements of visual arts and her properties make sense in this context?

The idea that art can constitute a body of knowing characterized the philosophical theories of Schelling, Novalis, Holderlin and Nietzsche. In more recent times, this thinking and debate have characterized contemporary philosophy and literature. Arguments for and against have spurred on further questions about how we can learn from the arts.

This question of knowledge and the visual arts provokes debate among the visual arts scholars in the university today. This contest should not be surprising since the subject matter opens onto fundamental questions regarding values in education, definition of subject areas, and the concept of knowledge. For example, the polarization of academic and artistic ability, the status of art and design as a form of knowledge; for some scholars, it is questionable and for some others, it is a clear process of understanding and imagination.

## **2. Body of the Argument**

In recent times, a lot of scholars are contemplating the idea of art practice as a process of creating new knowledge in the university space. This thinking does not go down well with some other scholars, who refuse to accept that art practice creates new knowledge with her discourse just like any other discipline in the university. The continual inferring that art creates new knowledge just like any other research discipline in the academia has constructed a lot of theories for and against the assertion by Christopher Fraying (1990), “Thinking through art” in which he insists that there are various contexts in which art practice creates theory, and theory in turn infers knowledge. How is this? Is it with the audience, making sense out of the body of art through their subjective experience of the art object, which of course infers the theory, and seems to satisfy the concept of “propositional knowledge” in the textual aspect? In order to assess this theoretical position, the authors of this paper need to further establish a paradigm to articulate this understanding clearly and, perhaps, to de-colonize the existing mode of thinking toward art.

Therefore, there is a need to focus on the theory of postmodernism as a way of understanding this phenomenon. The premise of postmodernism has shed a great light on the recent issue of knowledge and art practice. As the authors have earlier on stated, modernism and postmodernism are thought by some scholars like Leonard Webster and Mertova Patricie (2009 P 28), as sea change; it is evident of the ever-dynamic changes in the current of change; nothing is static, as ideas evolve, situations emerge from the old to the new. It supports new ideas and fresh exploration of new things around us. It does show that postmodernism is the current platform which the articulation that art practice creates new knowledge is being set for.

What constitutes the theory of postmodernism in art? Postmodernism is a reaction against modernism, which has in the recent times dominated the theory and practice of art. This theory is used to conceptualize challenges and changes to the established structures and belief theories in Western culture since the twentieth century. In this thinking, the authors examine the art practice within and outside the university and determines its role as an instrument of sociological communication in which knowing is created through the representational object of art and sees how much such ideas invent new knowledge within the body of art and aesthetics. Within this context the alternative thinking process of postmodernism becomes the platform for such inquiry. In view of this, the authors rely strongly on the multiple perspectives of postmodernism rather than the single story of the previous understanding on knowledge.

The core concepts upon which the authors heavily lean on, in furthering and theorizing that art practice can be a source of knowledge creation within and outside the university space, are the theories of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a German philosopher and seminal thinker within the philosophical hermeneutics of the twentieth century who dwells on the theories of “being and time, and being and becoming” within the postmodernist

ideology and phenomenology concept. What is “a being” or perhaps “Dasein” in the theories of Heidegger? “Being” is the essence and the focus of our inner search in all we do in life and the sociological interactions between us and the universe in the larger perspective. Knowledge is the gained experience of such interaction between the being and the universe in other words, Heidegger calls this experience, “earth and the world”, the emerging tension between earth, which is the physical representation of self and other tangible material in existence and the world which is the representation of the sublime and the essence within and around us that defines and contextualize one’s activities within this material existence called earth. Painting as a component of art seems to fit the process of bringing unknown to known using the physical elements like lines, space, and colours to realize the world within and around the artist and release certain level of understanding which can be contextually as “knowledge” by reading the subjective experiences these components of art bring to bear by engaging with them.

The challenge by James Elkins (2006: P 241) about whether or not the work of Pablo Picasso “Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)” (1907) contributes to the field of knowledge, is a thought which the article seeks to re-examine and justify its contribution to the field of knowledge in the visual arts. A careful examination of the narrative within Elkins’ context of knowledge is scary and worrisome to contend with. Elkins (2006) seems to believe that knowledge must come in the mode of a scientific inquiry, dealing with variables and measurements of data. This is probably so, however, it does not represent the humanistic inquiry which painting or other forms of visual arts would have found a support in. But constantly Elkins fails to produce a clear reason why the narrative sequence in painting or text cannot be called knowledge. Picasso’s work “Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)” interpreting the Ladies of Avignon, however, was a reflection and understanding of the ladies of Avignon by Picasso; this he did by reflecting upon his aesthetic explorative elements imbibed from other parts of the world in explaining his confrontation with visual imageries of Avignon. This painting has in no small measure revealed the social status of the ladies of Avignon within a given period.

Therefore, it is necessary to assume that visual arts could be referred to as “a knowledge creating process”. Webster, Leonard and Markova Patricia (in Irokanulo, 2017: 58) explain that, knowledge in modernistic terms has its philosophical origin at the time of the Reformation around the 1600s, and draws its origins from the works of philosophers, such as Descartes, the seventeenth-century Roman Catholic philosopher, who was seeking a tool to define truth and knowledge in terms of a belief in God and Christianity. His premise, “I think, therefore, I am” suggesting that knowledge is from the stream of human species and its understanding of the elements of creations the “earth” the human expressions of it; it should be seen from the perspective of human activities, and expression therein. In this light, painting as a form of knowledge finds its root within this understanding.

Art is like a human consciousness or in the understanding of the Hegelian theory as an “ever evolving concept that moves toward realizing the big idea” which is the cosmic reality; her merit cannot be contextualized within the understanding of human reality alone, because art evolves beyond it to a place of thought and abstraction that brings forth new ideas and knowing. Sartre’s philosophy of existentialism radically re-thinks the self and relation to the material world, and the subsequent interaction between the self and the material world and the experience therein. Martin Heidegger sees this as being and time as being reaction or changes within time and space, but still retain the self who is the (being). Whereas Platonic and Cartesian epistemologies assert that human beings have their innermost nature, including their being, determined in advance of experience by metaphysical essence according to Plato or pure rationality according to Descartes.

Existentialism declares that individuals constructs themselves and the world through action; an abiding determinative moral agency. Sartre (in Quinn 2009) out rightly rejects the thinking that we are defined and motivated by a priori concept or essences; the act is everything. It is only through the active transformation of our essences: the act is everything. Behind the act there is neither potentiality nor hexes nor virtue. Rather, it is through the active transformation of or engagement with the material world that people acquire meaning that constructs knowledge. This is to say that we are like a pure empty vessel; we know what we know through social construct.

Picasso was able to create knowing focusing on the subject of the ladies of Avignon to bring about aesthetic elements from another part of the world in a visual dialogue to recreate new understanding of the human figurative concept in the European two hundred years of pictorial ideology existence and evaluate the moral and social status of the ladies of Avignon. In that regard creating a kind of knowing in the society.

In this light, lets us look at one of the components of visual art as a tool in accessing truth within the human reality. Drawing is one of such components in visual Arts and a powerful tool of communication. It has the ability to convey both symbolic and emotional messages to its audience. According to Hills (in Irokanulo and Gbadon, 2015: P 43) drawings reveal and manifest the creative mind in a material process of capturing subjective reality in an act of meditative exorcism of order, a courting of artistic ideas; above all it is a lean instrument of visual formulation and the vortex of artistic sensibilities; so does the performance act play a postmodern approach in the visual arts.

For some artists and perhaps architects drawing in their sketch-pads are not just a place for another drawing but a place to order thoughts and visual articulation together for the creation of visual knowledge. It is a clear, practical way of examining a problem and getting through the obstacle to solving it, this is knowledge in action. Some visual artists in the current explorative processes have taken strongly to expressing through Performance in public spaces. This, they believe, would provoke a sociological reaction from the public. “Knowledge” in the visual arts could be seen from the perspective of the theories of Heidegger where he insists that art is not complete until the audience partakes in the creation of such aesthetic or art form by negotiating and critiquing the object of art. This, they believe would bring home the critical thinking that art is a conversation between the object and her audience, which in turn creates knowing within the human space.

It is within these two concepts of the audience and the art object that a conversation is located and knowing emerges. In essence, “the fine art object” become where knowledge is constructed from continuous dialogue with the object of art. In this view, art creates knowledge because of her three-part stances, which are: “art and her address”, “art and her subject matter” and “art and dialogue”. Within these contexts, art creates knowing. This idea takes us back to Heidegger’s “being and time”, which allows the conscious contemplations on subject matter and the time of the dialogue.

In a careful and methodological study of people and how they react to art as an event, especially drawing, Odun Orimolade, a drawing and painting lecturer at the renowned Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria, who recently has taken to performance to reveal some critical knowing to her audience has decided to create a performance using the elements of art, which are drawn as an act of performance. Orimolade herself has taken to performance as a tool of visual expression and re-examining the physical reality as a continuation of one’s illusive understanding of reality. The artist intends to challenge the structure of human learning through her drawing and hopes to bring new ideas of the given subject matter, ‘drawing’ and its constructive intent upon the human idea of knowledge.

She brings to bear her subjective understanding of drawing within the context of the movement of her body as she creates lines to represent real life situations; subjecting her body in the context of representing and contextualizing illusion within the embodiment of lines in a drawing. She, therefore, brings both drawing and performance to unite in one single body of expression. Both performance and drawing become strong tools of expressions in creating awareness in the present postmodern context. One of the two authors of this discourse wrote some things some years back when she (Odun Orimolade) was still engaged in her subconscious reaction on images from her reading of “the forest of a thousand demons” by Daniel Fagunwa (1951). She has grown from her subconscious reactions to fantasy to perhaps social criticism, using her body as a tool to reveal and create knowledge within the understanding of the public.

The medium of art and the medium of illusion are united in visual art, and the cognitive element of the works can neither be directly nor immediately inherent to them, this is true to Odun Orimolade’s performance at the Lagos City Hall 2016 perhaps brings the female body in a perspective once again, the history of art has shown how artist engaged the female body as a tool of aesthetic discourse which might have been responsible for the 1970s women artists began expression using the female body as the centre of their artistic expression, the status of the female body provokes contextual debate in the history of art which has influence women’s movement and the impact of new knowledge about aspect of women lives that should be reconsider when critiquing their art (Alexandra Howson 2005:46). Away from this debate Orimolade engage her body as an incubator of drawing in her performance entitled “drawing as a medium of performance”. With that performance, her body becomes the medium of reflection which began to question some of our previous understanding of the concept of “drawing” in that performance, she set to re-school our thoughts towards the component of communication which is “drawing”. Her body recreates the process of drawing for the audience to unconceal and reconsider the content truth and the artistic power of “drawing” as a tool for creating knowledge to the audience. This article explores how the artist uses her performance to create knowledge in some respect. Her performance intends most time to expose hidden meaning that most times would not be seen in a surface contemplation. It brings to bear philosophical issues and deep contemplation on the subject matter which is performance art of which drawing as a component and also a means of communication. If philosophy is the study of truth, then of course visual Arts interpret that essence.





Figure 1, **Odun Orimolade**, “Drawing as performance”, at the quadrangle of the Lagos City Hall, 2016, live performance.

The understanding of what knowledge is forms a critical debate within the context of humanism which has given rise to knowing from different modes of human intelligence. It would be interesting to perhaps in our journey of knowing what constitutes knowledge as a being within a parameter of the visual arts and as a mode in which knowing would come to bear on the intelligence of humanity. To look at the understanding of Martin Heidegger’s theory of existentialism and being and time, as a perspective of understanding the human knowledge away from scientific quantitative analysis advocates numbers and measurement as a way of knowledge.

In view of searching for the meaning of knowledge within the humanities, this article considers why Atiku Jelili, an academically trained sculptor who graduated from the prestigious Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 1997, has established his representational thought within the construction of the body of the art and his lived experience. He was arrested at one of his performances in Lagos State in 2016. His performance (which is the art object and the dialogue with the audience) was said to have provoked and annoyed the sitting Oba (local king), of Ejigbo in Lagos mainland. Atiku exposed his hidden terrible attitude toward the people, he rules over. Atiku insists that performance to him is a process of self-de-colonialization since the object of art in Africa is created to be performed not to be viewed like the Western art, performance becomes a dialogue with other cultures to create a hybrid and new energy, new knowing that allow socialization of the new order that opened a new discourse. Performance becomes the revealing of the concealment by the artist. These facts were unconcealed to the public to mentally subject the experience of Atiku performance to check the critical debate on what is true and false. This again is left to the mental capacity of those who experienced the artist’s performances to decide. In this, the performance was able to lead the public on certain insight to create an independent, self-knowing and a fresh construction of new knowing regarding the doings of their local chief and perhaps got the public acquainted with his corrupt practices in the land.



Figure 2, **Jelili Atiku** in preparation of “*Mama say make I dey go she dey my back*”, 2017; Courtesy of Gabriel Saigado

The theories and methodological processes of art have been a key issue in understanding whether or not art can create new knowledge within and outside the university community. According to (Bakhtin in Irokanulo 2014 P 47) Art creates knowledge within the three folds which are: thinking, making and writing, meaning art object and text they are interwoven into the process of creating new knowledge. Each of these three is enfilade to the other in that a creative space and force is brought to bear.

Let's turn to yet another component of the visual arts as a source of knowledge in the context of the humanism that allows the character and attitude of a man to constitute knowing within the parameter one sought to see and understand knowledge. The exploration of painting by Emmanuel Irokanulo in his doctoral dissertation can exemplify new knowing in painting that can be a source of understanding of this article.



Figure 3, Emmanuel Irokanulo, “*The Conference*”, 2010, Oil on canvas, 135x135cm. (Source: unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 2014)

The artist's engagement with shadow as a subject in the painting is phenomenological in nature; it is different from the previous age's encounter with the shadow of an object of light and shade in painting. It is a reconstruction of shadow as it confronts the imagination of the artist-researcher in a research in painting. The study captures and narrates a personal engagement with shadows as a source of inquiry in painting. This idea reflects his cultural belief on shadow of people Eastern Nigeria. In this context, it is a process of revealing

hidden ideas like the earth in “Heideggerian” aesthetic philosophy, while the concealed contextualized world. Still in the understanding of theories of Heideggerian aesthetics this concept is realized by the use of painting as focus on visual inquiry. This new thinking focuses on colours, space and objects and its subjective character, which brush textures, bring to bear by open value composition on the canvas to determine shadowing as a subject in aesthetic discourse.

The painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, through to the nineteenth century, employed shadows in their various paintings. Shadows served as an appendage in explaining the effect of light on objects in the environment. Artists like Caravaggio (1571-1610) and Rembrandt (1606-1669) and a host of other Dutch painters employed the effect of shadows in creating their paintings. In the nineteenth century, several of the artists including Claude Monet (1840-1926) attempted to capture the illusion of time and its effect on the environment. Till date, that has been the effect of a shadow in painting. The thinking in this study is to look at the shadow differently from the previous ages. Attention is turned to the theory of Gauguin. Unlike any other impressionist or the post impressionists, he did not employ shadows in his paintings, but saw them as separate entities that could manifest new thinking and idea. In his letter to Emily Bernard (1888) he affirmed that... “Instead of a figure if you put the shadow only of a person; you have found an original starting point”.

Gauguin presented an idea that shadow, after being studied, can lead to new understanding and design in painterly composition. He persuaded us to consider a composition where we have interactions between human figures with other elements of design. Instead of a human form, the shadow should be included in a composition. This was a new development which led to a new perspective in painting composition. Images that shadows create under this effect of light would be of interest because they bring us face to face with the Igbo mythology of multiplicity of the self specifically, the *Onyinyo* (in Igbo language shadow or image), “philosophy of the essence of the being”.

The way these images appear in our perceptual reality under induced light, and how the individual mind interprets them will be of interest to us and not necessarily the physical appearance of any shadow. Imagery derived from shadow brings to bear on the critical contemplation and theorization on the multiplicity of the self in Igbo metaphysical understanding creating a sort of sublimity of shadow. This is imitated by the multiple shadows cast from various light sources. One wonders if shadows in themselves could not be the major focus in painting as a narrative element included with or without objects or human images. Is it not possible that the shadow from induced or simulated light can create imagery that are quite challenging; should not relieving them from original objects that created the shadows become the concept of a painting? Could this concept develop into more complete images that represent visual thinking and perception of subjective reality? Is it possible to separate shadows from its material subject that cast it for the purpose of painting? The researcher would see if this theory is realizable and test its efficacy in painting composition. In this context new thinking and imagination which of course leads to understanding has been constructed within the painting space. According to Kantian philosophy in the third critique judgement states that understanding leads to reasons. In this faculty aesthetic imagination can lead to the construction of knowledge.

The wall hangings created by Blaise Gundu Gbaden for his doctoral thesis have in a profound way explored this knowledge generating philosophy from a fecund postmodernist perspective. Employing fabric as the major medium of expressing the ills and aspirations of human society (which he alludes to as social fabric) he creates kinetic paintings that provoke a series of dialogues with the audiences who encounter his art. Blaise believes that the fabric, which is also a nerve centre of human ability, has been polluted, and how to fix it is his major concern, therefore he seeks to enlighten the general public with the mindset of determining change (Jonathan and Gbaden, 2018:123).



Figure 4, Blaise Gundu Gbaden, “Wall of Racism”, front view, 2010, hanging, canvas, acrylics and ropes, 305cm x 550cm (Source: Gbaden 2014)

Gbaden began his argument by introducing “painting” to the public not on canvas though, rather as a basic feature of daily living using painting to be comparable to the sociological factor the society depicting the rich, the poor and the struggling state of the country and her frustration bring painting to the grassroots people away from the rich. The frenetic engagement in “Wall of Racism” attests to the fact that the new PhD in studio art introduced into Nigerian universities have been able to produce artists who can engage new theories and knowledge fields for the growth of the visual arts. This is essentially true for the painters Irokanulo and Gbaden who are graduates of such a degree programme.

### 3. In Conclusion

These four examples within the body of this article from Orimolade, Atiku, Irokanulo and Gbaden have indeed shown that the visual arts create knowledge from the perspective of humanism; the components of the visual arts have been brought to bear in a re-examination of the old ideas into yet another understanding, which bring fresh thinking and understanding of the old into a new concept and thinking. The idea of knowledge in the humanities differs so much from the sciences where knowledge means a quantitative analysis of data, and data must be evaluated and analysed to formulate a theory and experiment.

The tension between art practice and its experience and argument from the perspective of epistemology continues to heat up debates for and against “what knowledge is” and if visual arts can create knowing using images and movement in performance act? Can art produce propositional knowledge that can be justified with the concept of truth and belief that art seeks to create academic understanding of knowledge. Importantly, can this mode of knowledge satisfy the acceptance of knowledge in the context of the university? Within the context of the humanity and perhaps the social sciences, we have seen how “critical theories” of the German Frankfurt school and “visual culture” which is the hybrid of the popular American culture and the multimedia are used as elements to diagnose the elements and perhaps, Picasso’s construction of the ladies of Avignon as a critical social discourse in visual art have indeed created criticality of knowledge within the human activities and spaces, which the visual arts and the literal studies have clearly exemplified in our contemporary culture.

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